

NOTES FROM TIM GAMSTON'S SERMON- Sunday 9th February 2025 am

TITLE: "The need for spiritual discernment" TEXT: 1 Timothy 4 verses 1-16

SERIES: "Guarding the deposit" Pt 13 Scripture references from the ESV

1 Timothy 4:1-16 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons,² through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared,³ who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.⁴ For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving,⁵ for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

⁶ If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.⁷ Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness;⁸ for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.⁹ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance.¹⁰ For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.¹¹ Command and teach these things.¹² Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.¹³ Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.¹⁴ Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.¹⁵ Practise these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.¹⁶ Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Colours fade over time, and many things change, but we often do not notice that this is happening. It is not too serious if it is the colours in a picture that are fading, but there are serious consequences if our faith in Christ and the gospel fades or changes. This has consequences for our holiness and for the whole of eternity. We need to take heed of Paul's warning to Timothy (vv1-5 above). Just prior to this warning, Paul gives us the great hymn of salvation (1 Tim 3:16):

**Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:
He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations,**

**believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.**

This is a statement of faith that points us to Jesus:

- It points to his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension back to glory.
- It teaches us what is necessary for us to believe if we are going to have eternal life.

Yet Paul follows it immediately with a warning that some people will depart from the faith. There will be people who believed all that the Bible says about Jesus, but have departed from this confidence in Christ and now believe something that is contrary to the apostles' teaching. Their original belief has faded.

- The truth is that Christ makes us holy through his word and spirit, leading us to see his commands in scripture. As we trust him to make us holy, so the Spirit of God sanctifies us

Once these people believed the truth that a person is justified and made holy through faith in Christ alone, but now they were seeking to make themselves holy by following a set of rules that God never laid on his people, or by denying themselves pleasures that God gives for our enjoyment and to help us flourish.

This was happening in Ephesus and it still happens today. These two strands are called legalism and asceticism.

- Legalism means following a set of generally man-made rules in order to gain God's favour.
- Asceticism is the belief that we can deal with indwelling sin by denying ourselves God's good gifts

It is true that God calls us to a life of self-denial. There are sins we need to put to death, and patterns of godly behaviour we are to adopt. We might be called to deny ourselves some legitimate activities for the sake of the gospel and the good

of others. However, when we move away from faith in Christ and the work of the Spirit as the means to holiness, and

legalistically deny ourselves legitimate pleasures to try to make ourselves holy, then we have moved away from Christ.

We might appear to be godly, but if we are using our self-denial as a means to try and make ourselves holy, rather than trusting in Christ, then we have departed from Christ.

Paul tells his readers that God has already warned them that this would happen (v1). These later times are not some future day, but refer to the whole of the time between Jesus' ascension to heaven and his future return to earth. This is the time when the Spirit is at work to reveal Christ through the word.

Paul did not want Timothy, and the church at Ephesus, to be surprised that people turned away from the true faith of the gospel of Jesus Christ to a life of legalism and asceticism. This is still a danger and we are not to be surprised either.

We too can be deceived into legalism and asceticism.

Someone will tell us we should be following their rules in order to be holy, or that we can break free of sin by denying ourself some good gift that God has given us to enjoy. Before we know it, we are basing our standing with God on how well we are keeping their rules, or on how much we are denying ourselves God's good gifts.

We find ourselves departing from the true faith of the gospel of Christ

- 1. How does this departing from the faith happen? (vv1-2)** It happens when professing believers devote themselves to satanic teaching, taught by hypocritical liars whose conscience is hardened to the truth. The battle is not just against human false teachers. That is why there is such a need to pray.

The battle for truth is primarily a spiritual one

- For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12)**
- And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor 4:3-4)**
- Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is**

from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. ⁴ Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. ⁵ They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (1 John 4:1-6)

Satan is real and active. He seeks to destroy the faith of believers by undermining God's truth, as he has done since the beginning of time. Sermons may be written by human hands, but Paul wants us to look beyond the sermons and writings of insincere liars and recognise the source of their teaching as being from Satan, who questions and distorts God's truth and blinds the minds of unbelievers.

- This is serious for us because we have easy access to such teaching through the internet.

Novel teaching that quotes scripture might appear to be right, but it is an undermining of scripture through the subtlety of Satan's lies. When professing believers devote themselves to such teaching, they find themselves drawn away from the gospel and from Christ.

We can be secure in the knowledge that God does keep his people. John assures us that: **you are from God and have overcome [the deceitful spirits], for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (1 John 4:4).**

However, that does not mean that we can let our guard down.

- 2. How do we guard against being deceived?** Paul shows us that we need to exercise spiritual discernment.

We need to recognise false teachers and follow good servants of Christ

a) We must recognise false teachers. Paul identifies three marks of these people to help us:

- **They lead people away from Christ.** A true servant of Jesus Christ will always seek to lead God's people to know and love Christ better. In contrast, false teachers will teach in a way that leads people away from Jesus. Their aim is to get people to follow their group, and obey their rules for Christian living and doing church.

As soon as you begin to exercise your freedom in Christ, they will vilify you and cut you off. The mark of these people is that they are coercive and controlling. They are not interested in pointing you to Jesus.

- **They act with hypocrisy, lying without guilt (v2).** They will preach one thing, but practise something else. Their lives have no openness or integrity. They may speak about Jesus but their motive is to gain a reputation for themselves, gain money or grow their tribal movement. Their consciences are so hardened that they do not even feel guilty. If challenged with the truth of God's word, they do not see that they have said anything wrong. It is a scary thing to have a conscience so hardened that you no longer experience the convicting power of the Holy Spirit through the word of God.
- **They deny what the word of God says (v3).** The false teachers seemed to be saying that, if you really want to be holy, then you need to remain single and not get married. You also need to avoid eating certain foods that are unclean. The belief behind this is that physical things are evil but spiritual things are good. To be holy, you needed to avoid every physical desire and pleasure. That is asceticism and it does not work.

You cannot deal with sin in the heart by denying the flesh

God's word says that marriage is a gift given before the fall, and is therefore good. Paul commands marriage as a way to deal with lust. **To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. ⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. (1 Cor 7: 8-9).** The false teachers were wrong about marriage. They were also wrong about abstaining from certain foods. Jesus had declared all food clean, and Paul says these foods are given by God and **are to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth (v3).**

When you test what false teachers are saying against the word of God, you will find that they are doing what Satan does and undermining God's word. Indeed, they are undermining the very character of God. He is a generous and good God who gives us many, many good gifts to enjoy and thank him for.

We must, at all costs, avoid teachers who are leading people away from Christ,

acting with hypocrisy and undermining God's word.

- b) **We must follow good servants.** The good servant of Jesus Christ will highlight the dangers of legalism and asceticism, call out false teachers, and expose them for what they are. (v6ff – more next week)

The great need of our day is for spiritual discernment

Drifting away from faith in Christ to justify us and make us holy often happens slowly and without us realising it. It is the default position of humanity. Before we know it, the truth we once believed has been replaced by legalism and asceticism. The life of Christ in us has faded and been replaced by self-righteousness.

We need to pray for spiritual discernment.

- Spiritual discernment grows in us as we come to know Christ and his word, meditating and praying over it.

Then we can evaluate what we are taught according to his word.

- Spiritual discernment grows in us as good servants of Christ constantly point us to Jesus and the gospel, and show that it is through faith alone in Christ alone that we are justified and made holy.

The passage above highlights in a negative way what God is doing in a positive way in our lives.

Christ is at work to justify us before our holy God

Christ is at work to make us holy

Satan may accuse us, but Christ is our righteousness

Though Satan is at work in the world, Christ is greater.

- By his Spirit, Christ dwells in us and gives us discernment so that we can distinguish between God's truth and Satan's lies.
- Christ graciously gives us good servants who study God's word and rightly handle it. Good servants seek to live out God's word in their own lives so that they are not hypocrites when they teach God's people. They lay down a solid foundation of truth so that people will not be led astray.

Above all, Christ is for us and will keep us

He will hold me fast
He will hold me fast
For my Saviour loves me so
He will hold me fast

Matt Merker

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